

## Committed to the Things That Matter

**Mr Chong Kee Hiong, CEO of The Ascott Limited, shares about the things that matter most to him – family, fairness, and direction**

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CEO of The Ascott Limited, Mr Chong Kee Hiong is a firm believer of fairness and meritocracy, values that have underscored his leadership

Mr Chong Kee Hiong, Chief Executive Officer of The Ascott Limited, is a devoted family man. A father to four boys aged 7, 9, 11 and 15, he is a firm believer in big families, having come from a family with 11 children.

“Two is just not enough,” he smiled.

The family focus was one of the major tenets of his talk, the first In Conversation with CEOs session in the year and the seventh since the series started last year. His willingness to talk about his personal life was refreshing and when given the platform, he proved forthcoming, engaging, and often humorous. He shared freely about his childhood, education, family and career; and generously dispensed life lessons gleaned from his experiences.

### Family Matters

When they first started out, they did not plan on having a large family, Mr Chong confessed.

“We were very protective with the first one and overly excited,” he recalled. “But with each subsequent child, we became more relaxed and balanced. That is why we can manage so many.”

This relaxed approach to child-raising, he said, was the reason why he has been able to manage four children while still being heavily involved in the corporate world.

“So, you can have more,” he encouraged, dispelling the idea that more children means more work and less time for career.

Part of the balance he talked about is seen in how he gives his children freedom to make their own way through life instead of being overly worried and involved about how they would turn out.

“As parents, we try our best to instill in them the right values then we have to let them find their own path,” he said.

Other than lessons in swimming and Chinese language, which he views as critical survival skills, he does not force his children to take on Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) which they have no interest in.

What Mr Chong does insist on is spending time as a family.

“Quality (time) does not replace quantity,” he said. “Sometimes, just being there makes a difference. When my mother was still with us, she was already in her 90s. I was in my 40s. There was not much to talk about but just having me around was enough for her.”

Because of this value, the avid golfer gave up his weekly golfing session.

“Now, I only play on special occasions such as when my friends from abroad visit. I enjoy it more because it is not a routine and I have more time with my family.”

When asked to name his greatest achievement thus far, marrying his wife of 16 years was Mr Chong’s answer.

“It is a blessing I married Monica. I appreciate her a lot. There is a lot of flexibility in our relationship, a lot of give and take. She also helps me take care of all things at home so I don’t have to worry about them and can focus all my attention on my work.”



For Mr Chong (seen here with his wife and four sons), who loves having a big family, making time for his family is paramount

### **Fairness Matters**

Of his earliest influences in his life, Mr Chong talked about the books he read.

“I love to read. That is why I require almost 1000-degree lenses. I love the Chinese language and Chinese culture,” Mr Chong confessed.

His great love was Chinese sword-fighting novels which taught him that working through hardships and leading with humility will bring eventual success.

The theme of good triumphing over evil in the Justice Bao (Bao Qing Tian or 包青天) television series that chronicled the life and work of the benevolent and fair Chinese official who has long been held as a symbol of Justice is also a source of inspiration for him.

“It taught me to listen to two sides of every story; and to listen and give the benefit of the doubt.”

The belief in fair play and meritocracy has not only determined his leadership style, it also helped the trained accountant in his choice of jobs.

“Working in an accounting and audit firm, I personally felt the importance of a meritocratic system. Generally, people were promoted on a schedule and there wasn’t a significant difference in the rewards for those who have performed excellent and those who were average. But in order to be considered excellent, you would have had to work very much harder.”

He went on to join RSP Architects & Engineers and then Tuan Sing Holdings Limited which gave him the opportunity to work in Shanghai for two years. Joining Raffles Holdings Limited in 2001 as Chief Financial Officer marked his entry into the CapitaLand family.

“I had a direction that I wanted to head towards. But I didn’t plan everything,” said Mr Chong of his choices. I simply knew what I wanted to achieve and built on my strengths in every job that I go to.”



Mr and Mrs Chong and family

### Motivation Matters

Another thing that shaped his actions was his childhood.

“I grew up in a household where 14 people lived in a three-room flat,” said Mr Chong.

With six boys, five girls, a grandmother, and his parents all under one roof, Mr Chong did not have a bedroom to sleep in. Instead, he slept with his parents in the living room with only a sofa for a bed.

The young Mr Chong was also very thin. As a result, he was given free milk in school to help him bulk up.

“The teacher called me to the front and asked me what kind of milk I drank. She was not out to embarrass me. But it wasn’t a good feeling to be singled out for being small,” he recalled.

His humble background became his motivation.

“Because I was not well off, from the early days, there was a desire to do well and get ahead. I didn’t want to be in that kind of situation again.”

Mr Chong quickly went from a neighbourhood school, Kim Keat Primary School, to Raffles Institution and then Raffles Junior College before securing a place in the Accountancy Faculty at the Nanyang Technological Institute.

A man who knows how to balance direction with serendipity, family and work, two sides of every story - certainly, this is the mark of a man who not only knows what really matters, but also invests time and effort in them.

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